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“A Stout Heart Crushes Ill-Luck?": Materialism, British Masculinity, The Western Front, and the Changing Meaning of Luck in the Late-nineteenth and Early-twentieth Century

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History

In 1854, Samuel Smiles wrote of luck in his famous book *Self-help* that “it is the result of everyday experience, that steady attention to matters of detail lies at the root of human progress; and that diligence, above all, is the mother of good luck.”¹ Smiles was a member of a new generation of middle-class thinkers who redefined luck for a growing number of middle-class men and women in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Smiles’ definition of luck, as a function of “sheer industry and hard work,” was symptomatic of a nexus of forces changing the conception of luck from an innate, meta-religious, and meta-physical force into a phenomenon with identifiable cause.² These forces primarily consisted of scientific materialism and the rise of the social sciences, ideas of masculinity, and education contributed to a new understanding of luck that would be strained during the First World War.

Before beginning an examination of these shifts, luck must have a concrete context and definition. Luck may be described as a subset of superstition. Through the nineteenth century, good and bad luck remained a meta-physical but non-religious force that could be affected by ritual. Ritualized actions, such as throwing salt over one’s shoulder or hanging horseshoes, attempted to eliminate inconvenient developments or curry positive outcomes. Luck and superstition, were not conflated with religion, as religion largely remained an empirical mode of demarcating causation. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, superstition, and thus luck, could be defined in the words of Scottish chemist and dabbling social scientist, James Napier. Napier defined superstition as “Beliefs and ideas founded upon an erroneous idea of God and nature.”³ Luck was one such erroneous idea. But how did it become erroneous? In addition, how did the cultural watershed of the First World War affect this new definition?

The study of superstition is limited both thematically and chronologically. Studies of superstition focus on magic and witchcraft predominantly. Those that do consider the First World War neglect the cultural construction of luck, although the cultural repercussions of the First World War remain a well-traversed field of inquiry. A number of different academic fields have contributed to the study of luck, mainly through superstition. In 1975, Paul Fussell

¹ Samuel Smiles, *Self-help*, ed. Ralph Lytton Bower (New York: American Book Company, 1904), 159. Book reissued immediately after Smiles’ death.

² Smiles, *Self-help*, 115.

³ James Napier, *Folk Lore, or Superstitious Beliefs in the West of Scotland within this Century* (Paisley: Alex Gardener, 1879), 4.

produced the seminal work on the cultural memory of the war, *The Great War and Modern Memory*.⁴ Despite featuring a title that would seem to betray a transnational approach, Fussell concentrated solely upon the British war experience. While Fussell addressed the memory of the war, he omits a deep critical analysis of superstition in the trenches. While Fussell asserted that the intellectual world of the trenches was “a plethora of very un-modern superstitions, talismans, wonders, miracles, relics, legends, and rumors,” he failed to pursue a deeper analysis.⁵

While Fussell primarily looks back to the war as a cultural watershed, destroying the tradition of the nineteenth century and beginning a new cultural paradigm, other historians saw the war as possessing explicit cultural continuities. In *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, Jay Winters asserts that the cultural change seen throughout the war had finite continuities, and methods of mourning and remembrance especially that were possessed of deep-seated cultural practice. While Winters did not analyze superstition, it is within the framework of nuanced cultural change—both preceding, during, and following the war—that luck must be considered.⁶

Only anthropologists addressed superstition in war. In *Landscapes of the Western Front*, British anthropologist Ross J. Wilson provided a brief discussion of British soldiers and luck. According to Wilson, soldiers subscribed to notions of a meta-physical, non-religious belief system on the battlefield. Fighting-men recognized an interrelationship between “risk and luck, qualities which the soldiers would recognize as paramount in their lives at the front.”⁷ However, soldiers’ interpretation of luck seemed to be drawn from the war itself. To Wilson, belief in luck had no cultural forerunners but was treated as an isolated development in the war. Wilson, like those before him, failed to provide a cultural context to demonstrate the evolution of these paramount qualities.⁸

This examination will go beyond the limited discussions provided by historians, literary critics, and material anthropologists by exploring the cultural and intellectual currents under which luck changed from the mid-nineteenth through the First World War into the twentieth century. In this process, this study delineates a nuanced understanding of luck much different from the fatalism or dismissal found in other academic works. Luck, as with superstition, was not a product of the First World War. Rather, luck in wartime fit a larger narrative of change in superstition, science, and masculinity.

Sources for the three major discussions contained herein draw upon a wide range of sources. The first section, evaluating luck in the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, relies on popular literature, encyclopedias, and circulating magazines to illustrate a cognizant reorganization of luck from an occult force to a personally controlled attribute. The second section, considering luck during the war, relies primarily upon collections of letters written during the war, personal

⁴ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 115-131.

⁵ Paul Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory*, 115.

⁶ Jay Winters, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1-8, 64-78.

⁷ Ross J. Wilson, *Landscapes of the Western Front: Materiality during the Great War* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁸ Wilson, *Landscapes of the Western Front*, 160-62.

journals, and personal memoirs written between 1919 and 1921—before the acute pessimism of the war pervaded most soldiers’ publications—although many were published decades after their authors’ deaths. The third section considers post-war memoirs, documentary fiction, and popular literature after the war in an attempt to chart the discontinuities and continuities of wartime understandings of luck through mid-century.

As the frontline experience was particularly masculine, this study follows the conception of luck formulated through masculinity.⁹ Masculinity, particularly middle class masculinity as will be shown, directly influenced the formulation of luck. This argument will therefore follow middle class men, as these individuals experienced a particularly traumatic and well-recorded change in the meanings of luck.

I

It is now possible to return to Napier’s definition of superstition. As a scientist, Napier subscribed to scientific reductionism and scientific materialism, ideologies rising to prominence in the wake of the revolutions of 1848-52. An alternative to the emotional, new humanism of the 1830s and 1840s, science offered the promise of an objective view of the world. Science could provide the explanation not just for the natural order of things, but for the basis of society built upon and existing in the natural world. This ethos directed intellectuals to focus their inquiry on the stuff of things, the matter of the universe, and to reduce phenomena into their material components. The success of biological and physical sciences in explaining the world prompted the study of society in scientific terms. Anthropology, sociology, and psychology, all of which rose to prominence by the end of the nineteenth century viewed luck, as a subsidiary component of superstition, as antiquated. By producing a large number of studies of superstition or folk lore, social scientists undermined old conceptions of luck and endorsed new interpretations. Superstition predominantly remained only in festivals, literature, and philosophy.¹⁰

James Napier embodied the union of science and society. His study of Scottish superstition in 1879, *Folk Lore, or Superstitious Beliefs in the West of Scotland within This Century*, channeled popular intellectual fashions by cataloging superstitions either contemporaneously practiced by the rural or newly-urban poor, or those rituals practiced within living memory. While Napier denies a modern significance to superstition, he is quick to point out that the current age is the last opportunity in which the old, agrarian beliefs of the previous generations could be captured. Napier wrote, “Among the better educated classes it may be said much of the superstitions of former times have passed away, and as education is extended they will more and more become eradicated.”¹¹ Through education, science eliminated unfounded superstition by providing new

⁹ This is not to say that women had no part in the reformulation of luck. Indeed, most major changes in masculinity result from shifts in femininity.

¹⁰ J.W. Burrows, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 4-7, 35-41, 51-56, 68-69, 221-24.

¹¹ James Napier, *Folk Lore, or Superstitious Beliefs in the West of Scotland within this Century* (Paisley: Alex Gardener, 1879), vi.

causation. No longer did luck dictate the outcome of events.

Similar examinations of superstition and folklore followed Napier's work. In 1895, English author and economist William Hurrell Maddock published *Studies of Contemporary Superstition*.¹² Maddock criticized superstition observing that the rejection of rational scientific or social scientific evidence was simply ignorant. Science provided the ultimate answers, and superstition simply led weak minds astray.¹³ Between 1888 and 1903, Cora Linn Daniels, a fellow of the Royal Artistic Society, and C.M. Stevans, and a professor of psychology respectively, catalogued the extant superstitions of the United States and United Kingdom in *The Encyclopedia of Superstition, Folklore, and the Occult Sciences*.¹⁴ Over a similar period, British lawyer William Carew Hazlitt published his own individual study, *Faiths and Folklore: A Dictionary*. Hazlitt treated superstition as rural relics, and archaic inventions now superseded by modern explanation.¹⁵ Across all collections, the message was simple. Superstition—and luck with it—were deemed outmoded methods of explaining the world.

Isolating luck apart from superstition was a difficult endeavor. American education specialist Fletcher Bascom Dresslar captured the conclusions of previous studies concisely in “Superstition and Education.” Using the example of bad luck, Dresslar stated that:

Even in cases where natural loss would follow an act, or any combination of events, the term “bad luck” is not used synonymously with loss but some occult additional punishment or providence is included. For example, “It is bad luck to lose a glove.” Now no one would deny that it is bad luck to lose a glove, when bad luck and loss are synonymous terms. But bad luck here means more. It portends some external force acting against the loser.¹⁶

Dresslar demonstrated the sharp division between the luck of folklore and superstition and luck of a new, scientific age. In contemporary usage, luck was often associated with chance, convenience, or inconvenience, but folklore and superstition indicated good or bad luck as abnormal reward or punishment resulting from one particular action. Thus while inconveniences or tragedies might be labeled as bad luck in passing, true luck was unsolicited reward or punishment for seemingly innocuous events.

By cataloging, analysis, and reduction of the unknown into starkly scientific terms, social scientists dismantled the old concept of luck. Through increasing economic opportunity, changing masculine identities, and free education, luck became an action-driven concept. While

¹² William Hurrell Maddock, *Studies of Contemporary Superstition* (London: Ward & Downey Limited, 1895).

¹³ Maddock, *Contemporary Superstition*, iii-x.

¹⁴ Cora Linn Daniels and C.M. Stevans, *The Encyclopedia of Superstition, Folklore, and the Occult Sciences: A Comprehensive Library of Human Belief and Practices in the Mysteries of Life* (Chicago: J.H. Yewdale & Sons, 1903).

¹⁵ William Carew Hazlitt, *Faith and Folklores: A Dictionary* (London: Reeves & Turner, 1905). Hazlitt would later collect popular proverbs in use in the British Isles.

¹⁶ Fletcher Bascom Dresslar, “Superstition and Education,” *Education* 5, no. 1 (July 15, 1907): 161.

individuals previously coaxed mysterious external powers for aid, reformulation eventually placed agency solely with the individual, and dismissed the existence of innate, meta-physical, and meta-religious power.

Masculinity was integral in the creation of a new luck. Victorian and Edwardian society demanded specific beliefs and behavior from men. However, these demands mutated considerably as the century progressed. At midcentury, men expected to be caretakers of the family and controllers of the household. Cultural practice demanded they protect and provide for the family. Men could guarantee protection physically, by literally defending the family from harm, but more likely, it would be the maintenance of innocence in female and young male members of the family. Men exerted control by limiting the corrupting influences in the home and by doing so, claimed illicit subjects such as sex, politics, and business to be theirs alone. This was an exercise in control, as well as a reinforcement of prerogative.¹⁷

Wealth made the male role easier. By moving their families into wealthier neighborhoods, particularly away from the slums, middle-class men marginalized the distasteful influence of the lower and working class. Wealth, consequently, became the primary determinate of man.¹⁸ As John Tosh wrote, “The distinction of status and wealth to be found in the middle class were greater than either in the lower class or upper class.”¹⁹ By controlling a well-funded and well-run household, men fulfilled their self-declared role as protector-provider. Wealth allowed men to represent the family in a positive manner outside the home and protect the family from perceived harm, and, at the same time, control the actions of those within the household.²⁰

In demanding men provide and accumulate wealth, British masculinity formed a cult of action. Being manly meant proactive and aggressive pursuit of goals, including advancement in profession and society. To Victorian and Edwardian society, men had to control their environment even outside the home. Bending circumstance to one’s advantage was an essential mark of manliness.²¹ Writing in 1913 for the *Rotarian*, the official magazine of Rotary International, M.E. Garrison, a salesman, connected the stress of providing with the new concept of luck. He wrote:

Never trust to luck, there is no such thing, generally speaking, as luck. Bad luck is bad management and good luck is good management. I have seen many fail who trusted to luck instead of pluck Never let a prospective customer or a competitive salesman discourage you, remembering that all things yield to the will of the determined salesman who had confidence and courage.²²

¹⁷ John Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity in the Middle-class Home in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 8-16, 67-68, 199.

¹⁸ Tosh, *A Man’s Place*, 21-27.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 67-72.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Garrison, “The Salesman,” *The Rotarian* 3, no. 12 (Aug., 1913): 49.

Garrison's comments provide a window into the new conception of luck in the context of masculinity. The cult of action and concept of domestic masculinity is constant throughout. Foremost, Garrison declares that male action should overcome any challenge and succeed. Overall, Garrison calls for an aggressive form of masculinity informed by far more than an emphasis on proactive and domestic dominance.²³

An increasingly aggressive form of masculinity, expositied in Garrison's writing, was prompted by the growth of nationalism and imperialism. Debates no longer centered on the compassionate and charitable Muscular Christianity, but on the ambiguously defined concept of Social Darwinism. The harsh tenants of Social Darwinism superimposed the concepts of evolution articulated by Spencer and Darwin onto society and politics. Just as nature would only allow "the survival of the fittest," Social Darwinism argued that human society should only allow those best suited for success to achieve. By the century's end, any shortcomings in life were interpreted as the fault of the individual.²⁴

Faulting the individual, rather than the social environment or culture, affected the interpretation of luck. For those subscribing to Social Darwinism, those believing in luck were simply lethargic and apathetic individuals. Their position in life was dictated by bad luck had only themselves to blame. In *Lord Jim*, Joseph Conrad's eponymous protagonist observed fellow English patients in a hospital. He stated:

They talked everlastingly of turns of luck: how so-and-so got charge of a boat on the coast of China—a soft thing; how this one had an easy billet in Japan somewhere, and that one was doing well in the Siamese navy; and in all they said—in their actions, in their looks, in their purpose—could be detected the soft spot, the place of decay, to laze softly through existence.²⁵

Conrad affirmed the notion that those believing in luck lacked the motivation necessary to succeed. Waiting for the occult was far easier than actively pursuing goals, meaning those believing luck could catapult a man to success belied not only ignorance but also lethargy.

Those who found themselves in adverse situations could only blame themselves for acting incorrectly. In his 1905 work, *The Soul of London*, Ford Maddox Hueffer, later Ford Madox Ford to avoid association with Germany in the First World War, described the failure of a cobbler, Tockson, to launch a successful literary career. While Tockson had the talent to create poetry, his personal shortcomings led his career to stagnate and, as a result, led to bitter pessimism and self-defeatism. To Ford, Tockson clearly lacked luck, which he defined as "the knack of self-advertisement."²⁶ In addition to reading a middle-class interpretation onto the life

²³ J.A. Mangan, "Social Darwinism and Upper-class Education in Late Victorian and Edwardian England," in *Manliness and Morality: Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940*, ed. J.A. Mangan and James Walvin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 139.

²⁴ J.W. Burrows, *The Crisis of Reason*, 92-96; J.A. Mangan, "Social Darwinism," 137-40.

²⁵ Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim: A Romance* (London: McClure, Phillips, & Co., 1900), 10-11.

²⁶ Ford Maddox Hueffer, *The Soul of London: A Survey of the Modern City* (London: Alston Rivers, 1905), 147.

of a working class individual, a specialty of Victorian and Edwardian middle class, Ford demonstrated that an individual's actions should dictate success. As Tockson did not engage himself in self-promotion, he could not possibly confront the milieu of modern publishing and advance in his passion. Men who could not make their way in the world lacked a key component of masculinity. They became marked as inferior, and were rendered puerile and effeminate.²⁷

Control was a key component of imperialism and nationalism. Imperialism demanded that men maintain their domestic paternalism, their ability to control, abroad. The maintenance of empire became a ritualistic celebration of the nation. Nationalism, and the celebration of the state, endorsed aggressive masculinities informed by and informing imperialism. Nationalism demanded that citizens defend and sacrifice for their country. Men alone could pay the ultimate sacrifice and defend the country to the death in military conflict. Nowhere was this more evident in the construction of the heroic soldier-male in the 1880s and 1890s. Words like duty, honor, and "sacrifice" took on a near holy aura. These ideas, based on an idealized and ultimately erroneous idea of war, were the exclusive province of men.²⁸

Schools inculcated young men in the tenants of masculinity through their curricula, focusing increasingly on the classics and competition. Through readings of ancient Latin texts and sports, the state reinforced an aggressive notion of masculinity that recalled military duty. Cicero, Caesar, Horace, and Virgil were standard reading in public schools.²⁹ In 1913, the commander for the Royal Military Academy had the words of Horace inscribed in the chapel: "Dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori."³⁰ The same texts also lent another personally deterministic factor to luck. In the widely read *Aeneid*, Virgil's antagonist Turnus, declared, "Fortune favors the bold."³¹ Seneca wrote that luck is the confluence of opportunity and personal planning. Despite the Roman conception of luck as a deity, these texts provided ideas that supported luck as driven by action. Educators across Britain read this as an endorsement of luck served from personal diligence and proactivity.³²

Sport also reinforced masculinity by equating sport with war. Both attempted to achieve victory on "the field" in a physically demanding contest. War, like sport, had rules defined by the international community through a series of, famously at The Hague in 1899. By demarcating rules for armed conflict, the international community also reinforced the concept of war as sport, and thus reemphasized war, like sport, as strictly masculine endeavors. It is not

²⁷ Mangan, "Social Darwinism," 149-53.

²⁸ Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 4-9; Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 271-76.

²⁹ John M. MacKenzie, "The Imperial Pioneer and the British Masculine Stereotype in Late Victorian and Edwardian Times," in *Manliness and Morality*, ed. J.A. Mangan and James Walvin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 176-77, 181; J.A. Mangan, "Social Darwinism," 141-42.

³⁰ Horace, *Odes* 3.2.13; Royal Military Academy, *The Memorial Chapel, Sandhurst* (Sandhurst: Ministry of Defense/Royal Military Academy, 1961), 13; Francis Law, *A Man at Arms: Memoirs of Two World Wars* (London: Collins, 1983), 43-44.

³¹ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 10.284.

³² Mackenzie, "Imperial Pioneer," 181-86.

surprising that British men entering the First World War saw conflict as simply “playing the game.”³³

On the eve of the First World War, masculinity consisted of a strong but questioned set of principles. Men were expected to be domestic protectors, providers, and willing to sacrifice for the needs of empire and country. They could make these physical sacrifices by extending economic control or on the field of play, be that on a rugby or football pitch, or the battlefield. Collectively, the new man had worked alongside scientific rationalism to dismiss the emotive, natural luck of the Romantic period in favor of scientific explanation of the world. At the same time, these new explanations demanded that men control their own surrounding, including their economic circumstances. Luck, reshaped into a quality explained by personal agency, would be tested by the First World War.

II

The reality of modern, industrial warfare shattered the preconceptions with which young men entered the conflict. Young British soldiers volunteering for the war imagined the war based upon previous colonial wars—excusing the fiasco of the Boer War—the idea of the imperial soldier-hero, and popular war novels. Reality proved much different.³⁴ Monk Gibbon, an upper middle-class Irish Lieutenant in the 31st Divisional Train and later pacifist and poet, wrote in his post-war memoir, *Inglorious Soldier*, that the men going to war “had not visualized it as a continent slowly bleeding to death in the mud.”³⁵ The war’s method was entirely unanticipated. New weaponry and measures to counteract new technology denied the essential male values in Victorian and Edwardian society.

The very way armies waged war on the Western Front undermined the manner and the constructs of masculinity. In the aftermath of their defeat at the Battle of the Marne, the German Army began digging elaborate trenches intended to hold the advantageous chalky ridgelines against the advancing French and British. Entrenchment proved successful. The Allied advance stalled, and dug in opposite the Germans. The new warfare followed new rules, proving incorrect the long-held belief that tactical and strategic advantage lay with the attacking force. Artillery proved to be the only avenue available to “soften up” enemy defenses enough to gain ground, and the only counter measure to artillery, ironically, was artillery. The war became a conflict of long-range bombardment, wherein armies attempted to silence the opposing artillery, disrupt the enemy trench network, and take the bombarded trenches with infantry. This was far from the heroic war envisioned by most men. Instead, this war silenced agency, causality, and

³³ Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory*, 24-29; J.A. Mangan, “Games Field and Battlefield: A Romantic Alliance in Verse and the Creation of Militaristic Masculinity,” in *Making Men: Rugby and Masculine Identity*, ed. Timothy J.L. Chandler and Jon Nauright (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1996), 143-47.

³⁴ Joanna Bourke, *Intimate History*, 4-9.

³⁵ Monk Gibbon, *Inglorious Soldier* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1968), 1.

individualism.³⁶

The trademark tactic of trench warfare, the artillery barrage, terrified soldiers and robbed them of these closely held tenants of pre-war masculinity. Gone was the soldier's ability to control his surroundings. Instead, infantry now confronted an enemy that was a "poor sport." As the masculine imperative demanded that men meet their opposition on equal terms, high explosives fired from afar troubled soldiers deeply. Captain Rowland Fielding, an English middle-class career officer in the Cold Stream Guards, wrote to his wife about German bombardments, saying, "I confess the sensation is far from comfortable. You hear the shell from the moment it leaves the howitzer, and you can have no idea of the long time it takes to come, or of the weird scream it makes in doing so."³⁷ At Ypres in 1917, Francis R. Bion, commander of a tank in the 5th Tank Battalion, experienced a fierce barrage before going forward. He recorded his anxieties later in his diary:

By this time, a general bombardment had developed, and in the silence of the tank we could hear the shells screaming overhead from our own guns, and bursting near from theirs. The shelling was simply one continual roar. Your own guns sounded a sharp crack behind. You could, of course, distinguish nothing. You simply had the deep roar of the guns, which was continuous and imposed on that was the shrill whistle of the shells passing overhead—just as if it was the wind whistling in a gigantic keyhole. One very big German shell that burst near us could be distinguished above the rest. It sounded like an express train coming through a tunnel—a gradually increasing roar as it came nearer. Then a deafening crash. As the nearer shells burst, the tank used to sway a little and shudder. This was very beastly as one had previously felt that a tank was the sort of pinnacle of solidity. It seemed as if you were all alone in a huge passage with great doors slamming all around. I can think of no way of describing it.³⁸

The explosions Bion described, much stronger than anything most soldiers previously witnessed, further devalued the physical strength prized in men. The terrifying power and intensity of bombardments were unmistakable. Unable to move, unable to act to save their lives or the lives of comrades, soldiers simply waited, listening for the shell that might fall close enough to maim or kill them. Death rained daily from the sky, and seemingly nothing a soldier could do prevented its effects.

The prospect was maddening to soldiers preconditioned by society to view war as a sport, and valuing control over their own surroundings. Soldiers desired nothing more than to know a human enemy rather than de-personalized explosions. After a shell fragment struck one of his men in the stomach, Rowland Fielding aided in his evacuation, writing that he "helped them to lift [the wounded man] on to a stretcher. But, as he lay, he muttered plaintively, 'Oh if I could

³⁶ John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Vintage), 178-80, 186-92.

³⁷ Fielding to Edith Fielding, Cuinchy, May 8, 1915, in *War Letters to a Wife: France and Flanders, 1915-1919*, ed. Jonathan Walker (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2001), 4.

³⁸ Francis R. Bion, *War Memoirs, 1917-1919*, ed. Francesca Bion (London: Karnac Books, 1997), 30.

only come across the man that did that.”³⁹ Edward Campion Vaughn of the 1/8 Warwickshire Regiment, proffered similar complaints. Writing in his diary on the Somme during August 1916, Vaughn divulged, “It was a very different attack than what I had imagined: terror and death coming from far away seemed much more ghastly than a hail of fire from people whom we could see and with whom we could come to grips.”⁴⁰

The threat of wounding prompted more panic than the threat of death. If severely mutilated, men could quickly fail in their domestic and social duties. Those severely wounded lacked the prized possessions of masculinity: physical strength and the ability to control and provide. Without the full use of their bodies—by missing an arm or leg or losing vision—many men could not provide for themselves or their families, maintain successful households, or protect the innocence of family members. High explosives quite literally exploded masculinity. The war, as soldiers witnessed, was unjust. What had been delineated by treaty and conference, replete with rules for conduct and equipment, dissolved into a random and violent, but confusingly stagnant war. The threat to masculinity left soldiers without the tools to understand their environment through either preconceived notions of war, or through the ways society conditioned them to act and think.⁴¹

Some men took solace in religion, but others found the unforgiving nature of the battlefield incommensurable with the notion of a compassionate Christian God. The clash saw many soldiers suffer intense religious doubt, yet few completely rejected the trappings of faith. Most simply could not attribute causality on the battlefield to a supposedly benevolent and paternalistic deity. Unable to attribute agency to either the individual or God, soldiers attempted to find new causality on the battlefield. Luck came to explain the seemingly random, faceless violence around them.⁴²

By attaching agency to luck, soldiers attempted to explain the battlefield around them. While anthropologists contend that war luck was intensely fatalistic, luck had many more facets. Luck was a personal and group attribute, possibly featuring material and ritual components. At times luck took on the trappings of spiritualism, and became the universal dictator of events on the battlefield. Other interpretations of luck disavowed personal causality. To some soldiers, personal agency remained strong, but luck remained a useful tool for describing events outside the control of the individual. In most instances, soldiers carried a non-categorical interpretation of luck. Luck could hold all or some of these properties for individual soldiers and remained extremely dependent on the individual throughout the war.⁴³

To some soldiers, luck was innately personal. While individuals could not control their own

³⁹ Fielding to Edith Fielding, France, 31 March 1918, *War Letters to a Wife*, 167.

⁴⁰ Edward Campion Vaughn, *Some Desperate Glory: The Diary of a Young Officer, 1917* (London: Frederick Warner, 1982), 199.

⁴¹ Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 31-31-42, 70-75; Jessica Meyer, *Men of War*.

⁴² Richard Schweitzer, *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt among British and American Great War Soldiers* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 195-99.

⁴³ Wilson, *Landscapes of the Western Front*, 162-63.

exposure to violence, their luck could stave off mutilation or death. Personal luck could be good or bad and often remained mysterious until the individual was exposed to danger. In 1914, before departing for the frontline, M. Aldrich, a British attaché at serving in France with the British Expeditionary Force in 1914, overheard the soldier Georges, expressing the mystery of luck, saying “if I have the luck to come back—so much better.”⁴⁴ Others had very exact understandings of luck. A Second Lieutenant wrote of his young cousin convalescing in England after a miraculous recovery from a wound, that “if he should have to go on active service again I feel that his invariable good luck will bring him through.”⁴⁵ Ironically, Townsend did not have good luck. He died only days after recording his opinion. Yet his thoughts indicate the permanency of luck perceived in some soldiers. For those who escaped repeated narrow escapes, there could be no other explanation for their uncanny survivals in a world devoid of personal agency.

Luck explained why particular units or soldiers suffered horrific fates and others did not. For Rowland Fielding, Luck explained how he could survive four years but the young newcomer, Sergeant Major McGrath perished. When an artillery shell killed the new Sergeant Major assigned to his command as soon as he reached the firing-line, Captain Rowland Fielding, then a four year veteran of the war, described the death in a letter to his wife. He wrote, “McGrath arrived the day after I returned from leave, and within half an hour of his reaching the first-trench, was lying dead, a heavy trench mortar-bomb having fallen upon him and two others, and wounding two more. Now is that not a case of hard luck chasing a man, when you consider how long others of us last?”⁴⁶ Only luck gave Fielding an explanation for his own survival.

Through ritual and talisman, some men attempted to control or harness luck. By taking specific actions or collecting items with special sentimental attachment, soldiers attempted to reinforce their good luck and stave off injury or death. Common dictates advised soldiers always to wear their helmets. Soldiers might also ritually kiss their equipment, predominantly their helmet, rifle, and rank or unit insignia, before going into battle. Kissing letters remained a popular pre-battle routine. Successfully navigating combat after engaging in ritual reinforced this behavior. Survival provided proof of actions’ luck-giving properties.⁴⁷

Talismans or good luck charms remained popular throughout the war. Lieutenant Charles Murray Child of the Gloucester Regiment carried a four-leaf clover for several days before sending it home to his family, hoping it would continue to give good luck. Other soldiers collected ammunition, weapons, and shell fragments or nose caps. The behavior, as historians like Joanna Bourke demonstrated, became commonplace during the war. Picking up good luck charms from the battlefield had an added meaning: by acknowledging the death of others,

⁴⁴ M. Aldrich, *A Hill Top on the Marne, being letters written between 3 June and 8 September, 1914* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1915), 66.

⁴⁵ Houseman, *Letters of Fallen Englishman*, 277.

⁴⁶ Fielding to Edith Fielding, Curragh Camp, 14 December, 1916, *War Letters to a Wife*, 83.

⁴⁷ *Stanley Spencer’s Great War Diary, 1915-1918: A Personal Account of Active Service on the Western Front*, ed. Terry Spencer (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military, 2008), 106-07; Bourke, *History of Killing*, 29; Wilson, *Landscapes of the Western Front*, 152-54.

soldiers in some small measure acknowledged their ability to survive, their own good luck. These talismans were physical reminders of their own survival as well as talismans intended to bring good luck.⁴⁸

Some soldiers took less conventional methods to acquiring good luck charms and entered the war with items intended to grant the bearer good luck. Frederick Palmer, an Army war correspondent recalled the good luck of Private Charles Steward, a newly arrived clerk's son:

Being shot through the stomach the way he was, all the doctors agreed Charlie [Pvt. Steward] would die. It was like Charlie to disagree with them. He always has his point of view. So he is getting well. Charlie came out to the war with the packing case which had been used by his grandfather, who was an officer in the Crimean War. He said that would bring him luck.⁴⁹

The conveyance of good luck charms to the battlefield illustrates continuities between occult luck and causal luck. Therefore, while science could provide new answers for the cause of existing phenomena, war appeared to be a situation, which remained outside the ability of the individual to control.

Luck could also be confused with religion, acquiring the vague trappings of spiritualism. Yet spiritualism it was not. While spiritualism in the war denied death, luck, in contrast, explained why some men died and others survived. Soldiers experiencing religious crises coopted luck to provide similar emotional support on the battlefield. Indeed, many soldiers referred to luck as an ambient force dictating events on the battlefield rather than as a personal attribute. This aspect of luck not only presented luck in semi-religious terms but also completely detached personal agency from the battlefield. The war's denial of personal agency and causation permitted luck as an acceptable excuse.⁵⁰

John Jackson, a rail clerk and particularly pious infantryman in the 1/79 Highlanders frequented church services—even of other denominations—and came to refer to luck as a pervasive, presiding over the battlefield. In many ways, this closely aligned with faith, complete with a sense of trust in luck and complete with personification of luck.⁵¹ Coming under fire, Jackson and a companion took cover. When the bombardment failed to abate, the pair “decided to rush from hole to hole one at a time and trust to luck.”⁵² Later, Johnson would put his faith in luck again. Fixing wire in No Man's Land, the unarmed Jackson spotted several shadowy figures moving toward his position. He believed, “To try and run for it would have revealed my presence, and it seemed like asking to be shot, so I decided to stand my ground, and trust to

⁴⁸ Laurence Houseman, ed., *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1930), 76; *A Month at the Front* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2006), 46-47; Joanna Bourke, *History of Killing*, 25-31, 146-47.

⁴⁹ Frederick Palmer, *My Year of the Great War* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Co., 1915), 356.

⁵⁰ Richard Schweitzer, *The Cross and the Trenches*, 212-14; Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 57-59.

⁵¹ John Jackson, *Private 12768: Memoir of a Tommy* (Stroud, GL: Tempus, 2004), 1-3.

⁵² Jackson, *Private 12768*, 131.

luck.”⁵³ In both instances, Jackson remained unscathed. To the pious Jackson, luck took on almost an aura of the divine. Luck could spare or condemn men just as faith could, but was ever-present and demanded trust in order to work.

Luck could now explain shortcomings, such as forgetting equipment. While watching a group of West Indians divide rations, the ruined square Jackson stood in came under attack. One shell buried the West Indians under a cascade of bricks, and Johnson attempted to help. Writing in his journal later, Johnson recalled, “Unluckily for me, I was not even carrying my gas-helmet, though even if I had been, it is doubtful if I should have had time to adjust it, and before I was halfway across to the niggers [West Indians] a gas shell from ‘Jerry’ dropped in the square, and I got enough gas to knock me down senseless.”⁵⁴ By employing luck, Jackson marginalized his own responsibility. His injury was certainly not his own fault. It was simply poor luck that he forgot his life-saving equipment. When Houston Woodward, a mechanic and ex-infantryman, attempted to repair the inner workings of an aircraft, he used luck to divest blame from himself for the mangling of some of the machine, saying, “I never broke a machine, not even a wire. I was very anxious to keep up the record, but here was the whole *appareil* a wreck. Nobody said anything, for it was impossible to avoid, just rotten, hard luck.”⁵⁵ Some things on the battlefield just occurred without causation and without blame.

Nevertheless, some soldiers did attribute blame. To these men, luck did not explain personal action, but rather only explained what an individual could not control. According to an officer interviewed by author Henry Newbolt, the soldier “noticed that many of our few casualties during these days have been due to sheer folly on the part of individuals; but to be sniped is rotten luck.”⁵⁶ The anonymous officer’s interpretation of luck represented a stronger grounding in the luck popularized in middle-class culture through the latter portion of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The soldier acknowledged the existence of a meta-physical force, but limited the effects of this force to events beyond immediate personal control. For this soldier, the individual could minimize the chances of injury but in the event a man was killed or wounded, the method lay beyond personal control.

Through the war, luck clearly accumulated new and nuanced meanings. Almost all uses of luck attempted to explain causality on the battlefield. During the war, the modern and reductionist approach to luck, clad in masculinity, remained with some soldiers. Others, however, departed from the middle-class interpretation of luck as a personal product, instead using luck in a variety of ways to understand the brutality of industrialized warfare. The post-war years continued to show this wide divide.

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⁵³ Ibid., 133.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 182-83.

⁵⁵ Houston Woodward, *A Year for France: The War Letters of Houston Woodward* (New Haven, CT: Yale Publishing, 1919), 177. *Appareil*, meaning a mechanical device in French, became a universal British term for any self-propelled war machine—tank, plane, or automobile.

⁵⁶ Henry Newbolt, *Tales of the Great War* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1917), 23.

The post-war world showed a sharp divide in the concept of luck. To many soldiers returning home, reassuming control of their civilian lives changed their interpretation of luck back to a force dictated by personal ability. While many soldiers reflected on the miraculous nature of their survival, many isolated the battlefield as a geographic and ideological unit. Preparing to return home from France sometime in January, 1919, Rowland Fielding wrote to his wife that, with the war over, he could leave the past four years behind him, and return home to be a father to his two young girls. The impetus to leave the war behind suggested that soldiers left luck, like many other beliefs and behaviors specific to the war zone, behind in Flanders.⁵⁷

Writers who did not experience the war appeared not to have picked up the soldier's more nuanced conception of luck. In 1922, Joseph Conrad, a figure who never traversed the battlefield, discussed luck through the main character of *The Rescue*, Thomas Lingard. In an epiphany considering the sea, Lingard established luck as a fallacy, saying the sea "had lulled him into belief in himself, his strength, his luck – and suddenly, by its complicity in fatal accident, it had brought him face to face with a difficulty that looked like the beginning of the disaster."⁵⁸ To Lingard, the sea, something truly uncontrollable, established what he believed was personal luck as a fallacy. In comparison with the realities of the world, luck had no place. For Conrad, an individual's rationality and attention to detail continued to determine luck.

Luck, however, provided a key continuity through the war years. While some tolerated the memory of the war stoically, others came to terms with the experience by recording their experiences. In the post-war decades, war time luck was manifested in the documentary-fiction, memoirs, and fictional works written by war survivors. These authors' writings would immortalize wartime luck.

Beginning with Edmund Blunden's memoir, *Undertones of War* (1928), post-war memoirists and authors of war documentary-fiction carried an intense memory of luck. For Blunden, luck lay in materiality and trophy-taking. Throughout the war, Blunden collected *pickelhaubes*, the famous pointed helmet worn by the German army during the first two years of the war. Not only did these helmets signify his participation in the war—and provide convenient presents for his sweetheart—but in his own mind bestowed short periods of luck on him. Trophies from the battlefield indicated survival and superiority. By surviving battle and collecting trophies, Blunden established himself as the better man.⁵⁹

Other authors attempted to reclaim agency against the luck of the battlefield. In *Good-bye to All That*, a literary memoir much like Blunden's *Undertones of War*, Robert Graves described one soldier attempting to take advantage of luck by acquiring a "Blighty," a wound sending him back to Britain to convalesce. Graves described a soldier in his squad who surreptitiously raised his hand above the parapet. When no enemy shot him, the soldier then raised his arm, then

⁵⁷ Fielding to Edith Fielding, France, January 1919, *War Letters to a Wife*, 193-94.

⁵⁸ Joseph Conrad, *The Rescue: A Romance of the Shallows* (New York: Doubleday, Page, & Co., 1922), 127.

⁵⁹ Edmund Blunden, *The Undertones of War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1965), 143-44; Bourke, *Intimate History*, 4-7.

shoulder. Frustrated, he stood up whereupon he was promptly shot through the head. Through Graves' lengthy description, he acknowledges personal qualities of luck, but also the futility of combat. Graves himself resolved to tempt his luck and risk exposure to danger in order to return home. He gave up his plan when his luck appeared too poor to survive a wound.⁶⁰

Similarly, author and literary critic Monk Gibbon, a member of the Irish Rifles during the war, recalled a similar impetus to eliminate the bad luck of serving in the trenches. He removed his helmet and continued his duties, in defiance of popular superstition, until his commanding officer "noticed its absence and ordered me to make use of it. He probably knew what was in my thoughts. A "blighty" from one of those bullets would be as good a way out of my luck as any."⁶¹ In the "reign of unreason," as Gibbon named the war, nothing but luck, abstract and inexact, provided a suitable explanation for the terrible and random events occurring ceaselessly about soldiers.⁶²

The war went further, and found a home beyond the post-war memoir and documentary fiction. In J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, magic mimicked wartime conceptions of luck. Tolkien, a lieutenant in the Lancashire Fusiliers during the war, experienced luck firsthand. Following the war, he attributed luck with saving his life. Inexplicably falling severely ill on the last day of June in 1916, Tolkien was invalided to the rear the day before the Somme Offensive began. The next, day nearly three-quarters of his unit became casualties. The inability to explain wartime events was manifested in Tolkien's fantasy novels. Unlike previous portrayals of magic popularized in the pre-war years, Tolkien imagined magic as an innate force providing causality and special powers. Inside Tolkien's Middle-earth, events occur not but individual items imbued with unique and ambient powers—like the good luck charms from the war—but reinforced from Tolkien's own preoccupation with German and Celtic folklore. Magic not only explains the power of some items, including the titular ring, but also explains chance meetings and miraculous escapes from harm. Through magic, Tolkien integrated the conceptions of luck familiar to him from the battlefields of his youth.⁶³

Wartime luck, as Tolkien's popular fantasy trilogy shows, remained through the mid-twentieth century. This luck, however, was far-removed from the luck envisioned at the turn-of-the-century. Following the failed revolutions of 1848, the rise of scientific materialism provided new causation for events previously attributed to luck. Furthermore, social sciences' incessant cataloging dissected and devalued superstition as a trait of a bygone age. The result, incorporated into schools across Britain, blended with masculinity and Social Darwinism, and remolded luck into a function of a man's control, diligence, proactivity, and, above all, his manliness.

The First World War, particularly the emasculating experience of Western Front, reshaped soldier's definitions of luck. The new understanding varied among soldiers. To some, luck was a personal attribute. Others viewed luck as group attribute or an ambient force silently directing

⁶⁰ Robert Graves, *Good-bye to All That*, 2nd ed. (London: Cassell, 1958), 93-98.

⁶¹ Monk Gibbon, *Inglorious Soldier* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1968), 252.

⁶² Gibbon, *Inglorious Soldier*, 2.

⁶³ Stratford Caldecott, *The Power of the Ring: The Spiritual Vision behind The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Cross Roads, 2005), 10-12, 27-30, 110-12.

events on the battlefield. While not all soldiers divorced agency from the individual, luck remained a widespread albeit variable way of explaining and ordering the random and faceless violence on the battlefield.

Following the war, many soldiers left the new notions of luck in the trenches, and preferred instead to reconstruct their post-war lives in the fashion resembling their pre-war lives. While authors who never set foot on the battlefield carried the turn-of-the-century definition of luck through the war, soldier-authors returning home wrote wartime luck into their memoirs and novels. These works, integrated into the British cultural mythology of the war, remain a lasting talisman of the war—for good luck or for ill.

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